

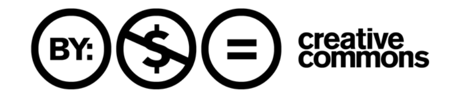
Cahiers de linguistique - Asie orientale

Decipherment of Yue-Ren-Ge (Song of the Yue boatman)

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Résumé

L'auteur présente un déchiffrement d'une chanson en langue Yue, la "Chanson du batelier Yue (|$ Л Ж)", transcrite en caractères chinois et traduite par un auteur chinois du 6ème siècle avant notre ère. Se fondant sur l'hypothèse que la langue Yue appartenait au groupe Thai, il compare les mots de la chanson avec des mots du Thai écrit. L'article comprend également une présentation succincte du système de reconstruction du chinois archaïque mis au point par l'auteur.



ZHENGZHANG Shangfang

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(SONG OF THE YUE BOATMAN)

RESUME

L'auteur présente un déchiffrement d'une chanson en langue Yue, la "Chanson du batelier Yue (越 人 歌)", transcrite en caractères chinois et traduite par un auteur chinois du 6ème siècle avant notre ère. Se fondant sur l'hypothèse que la langue Yue appartenait au groupe Thai, il compare les mots de la chanson avec des mots du Thai écrit. L'article comprend également une présentation succincte du système de reconstruction du chinois archaïque mis au point par l'auteur.

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The "Yue" were a large population group that once lived in South China, mainly in the coastal areas south of the Yangzi estuary. Little is known about their language, due to the almost complete lack of written records. The Yue-Ren-Ge 越 人 歌 (Song of the Yue Boatman) is the only complete text in the Yue language that has been transmitted to us. Its pronunciation was recorded in Chinese characters, and the transcription is accompanied by a Chinese version, based on the meaning of the song. Moreover, that Chinese version was written in Chu-Ci 楚辭 poetic form, by a person from the state of Chu 楚 , at the time the song was sung around 528 BC.

Both the transliteration in Chinese characters and the Old Chinese (OC) of the song are found in the Shan-Shuo chapter of the Shuo-Yuan (説苑。善説篇), a work by Liu Xiang, a Han dynasty author.

Because the language in which it was sung is unknown, the Song has remained something of a mystery for a long time. In 1981, Prof. Wei Qing-wen made a pioneering comparison between the transliteration in Chinese characters and certain Tai languages (mostly Zhuang dialects), and attempted a Chinese version of the Song. Prof. Wei's use of Tai languages was an important step towards the solution, even though his version could not be perfect. I followed his lead, but compared the transliteration mainly with written Thai (WTH), because WTH is the most anciently attested form of Thai and other languages in the Tai group, and also because it is generally believed that the Yue people spoke a Tai language.

The transcription of WTH used in this paper renders low-tone initials by voiced initials; tone 1 ("maix ek") is signed by -h and tone 2 ("maix do") by -x.

I have put forward a reconstruction system for OC (Zhengzhang 1984, 1987). It is that system which I use to transcribe the Chinese characters in the Song. The main features of my system are the following:

(1) There are six long, and six short, vowel phonemes:

short vowels:	i	脂	ɯ	之	u	幽
	e	支	a	魚	o	侯
long vowels:	ii	脂	ɯɯ	之	uu	幽
	ee	支	aa	魚	oo	侯

The long vowels develop into the 1st, 2nd and 4th divisions of Middle Chinese (MC), and the short vowels evolve into the 3rd division of MC, which lacks -j- in most syllables of Proto-Chinese and Old Chinese.

(2) The MC division 2 finals, as well as the 'Chong-niu division 3' part of division 3, and the non-dentilabializing division 3 finals are characterized by medial -r- in OC. In contrast, the MC division 1 finals, division 4 finals, as well as the 'Chong-niu div. 4' part of division 3, and the dentilabializing part of division 3 finals, are characterized by no medial, or medial -l-, in OC.

(3) The MC Rising tone is characterized by a final glottal stop -ʔ in OC; the MC Departing tone reflects OC -s or -h; the MC Entering tone was characterized by *voiced* stops -b, -d, -g in OC.

(4) The MC initial 來 l- is derived from OC *r-, or, for some words, from consonant clusters *ɦgr- or *ɦbr-; MC 以 j- derives from OC *l-, or, for some words, from clusters *ɦgl- or *ɦbl-.

(5) The MC palatal sibilants (i.e. the 照 div.3 series): 章 tɕ-, 昌 tɕ'-, 禪 dʑ-, 日 nʑ-, 書 ɕ-, 船 ʑ- in most cases come from OC *klj-, *khlj-, *glj-, *ŋlj-, *hlj-, *ɦlj- respectively. A subset of words with MC 端 t-, 透 th-, 定 d- (including 知徹澄) are from a type of OC consonant clusters in which the two consonants are tightly attached to one another (this type of cluster is marked by the symbol [']): they come from either *kl'-, *khl', *gl'-, or *ʔl'-, *hl'-, *ɦl'-, or *pl'-, *phl'-, *bl'-.

The Chinese character transliteration of the original text includes five verses. For each character in the transliteration I give: 1) OC pronunciation; 2) WTH equivalent; 3) WTH pronunciation in alphabetic transcription; 4) Chinese gloss; 5) English gloss.

The main contents of the Song according to the Old Chinese version are as follows: 1) I am rowing with the prince at night; 2) I am shy; 3) I am pleased to know the prince and I like him secretly. These are the very contents of my decipherment. The first verse is deciphered as follows:

(1) VERSE 1

濫	兮	抃	草	濫
ɦgraams	ɦee	brons	tshuuʔ	ɦgraams
คล้ำ	แฮ	เพลิน	เจอ,เจอะ	คล้ำ
glamx	ɦɛɛ	blɤɤn	cɤɤ, cɤʔ	glamx
夜晚	哎（語助詞）	歡欣,陶醉的	遇見	夜晚
dark, evening	a particule in song	joyful, raptured	to meet	evening

The first verse does not interrhyme with the others, although there may be an internal rhyme between the first and last word in it. Further on, verse 3 ends with 胥 , WTH saʔ, rhyming with 湖 , WTH gaʔ, in the 5th verse.

(2) VERSE 2

予	昌	恆	澤	予	昌	州
la	thjang < khljang	gaah	draag	la	thjang	tju < klju
รา	ช่าง	กระ ดาก		รา	ช่าง	แจว
raa	djaangh	kraʔ - ʔdaak		raa	djaangh	cɛɛu
我倆，我	很會，多麼	害羞，難爲情		我們，我	很會，善于	搖船
we, I	be apt to	shy, ashamed		we, I	be good at	to row

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Page	Line	Errors	Corrections
162	- 6	恆	桓
163	- 6	于 la	予 la
164	4	เรี่ย/ใคระ	เรื่อย/ใค่ร
	14	nam^5	ɲam^5
	15	ŋ- and n-	ŋ- and ɲ-
165	17	平； 子；	乎； 予
167	- 13	would be easily	would not be easily

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(3) VERSE 3

州	𩜱玉篇口敢切	州	焉	乎	秦	胥胥
tju	khaamʔ	tju	jen	ɦaa	dzin	sa
แจว	ข้าม	แจว	เยิ่น	ฮา	ชื่น	สะ,สา
cɛɛu	khaamx	cɛɛu	jɤɤnh	ɦaa	djɯɯnh	saʔ
摇船	渡越	摇船	漫長，久久	啊	愉快	滿意，稱心
to row	to cross	to row	slowly	a particle in song	joyful	satisfy, please

(4) VERSE 4

縵	予	乎	昭	澶	秦	踰
moons	la	ɦaa	tjau<kljau	daans	dzin	lo
มอม	รา	ฮา	เจ้า	ท่าน	ชิน	รู้
mɔɔm	raa	ɦaa	caux	daanh	djin	ruux
污穢的	我們，我	語助詞	王子，君	閣下，您	熟悉	知曉，了解
dirty, ragged	we, I	a particle	prince	Your Excellency	acquainted	know

(5) VERSE 5

滲	惿集韻上紙切	隨	河	湖
srɯms	djeʔ<gljeʔ	sɦloi	gaai	gaa
ซุ่ม	ใจ	เรี่ย	ใคร่ะ	คะ
zumh	caï	rɯaih	graih	gaʔ
隱藏	心	始終不斷	思慕	語助詞
to hide	heart	forever, constantly	to yearn	particle

In the first verse, WTH glamx is compared with 濫 *ɦgraams. WTH glamx means 'dark', but also "night, evening' (Li 1977: 214-6; note the long vowel in Ahom khaam and the Departing tone in Wuming <u>xam</u>[6], Dioi <u>ɣam</u>[6], in agreement with the Yue pronunciation). Prof. Wei was the first to compare the character 濫 in the song with this word, citing Longzhou <u>kam</u>[6], Rongshui <u>gam</u>[5], Lainan <u>ŋam</u>[6] and Sui <u>nam</u>[5], all meaning 'night'. I think the nasal initials ŋ- and n- in Lainan and Sui are due to the influence of the prefix ɦ- in ɦgr-, which also caused the velar stop -g- in OC 濫 to disappear (cf. 藍 OC *ɦgraam ⟶ MC lam(A), WTH graam ⟶ <u>khraam</u>[2]: but Miao Xuyong ŋkaŋ[2], Fuyuan ntɕen(A), Jiwei <u>ni</u>[2] also have nasalized initials). This is the only word which I adopt from Professor Wei's article.

WTH raa (second verse) means 'we two', but also 'I'; cf. Lü hra, White Tai ha 'I' (Li 1977:143-4, note 1).

The third verse contains 3- and 4-syllable expressions 州𩜋 州焉 and 秦胥胥 : these are common phraseological forms in Tai.

Also in the third verse, WTH saʔ corresponds to 胥 . The character 胥 also occurs in 姑胥 *klaa-sa, the name of a summer recreation residence of the king of Wu outside his capital (see 越絶書 vol.2), compare WTH kraʔ-saʔ 'satisfactory place' (WTH kraʔ, written as traʔ in modern usage, means 'place, region'). The same place-name is also transcribed as 姑蘇 *klaa-saa, which is the old name of Suzhou (OC *saa-tju). In another paper (Zhengzhang 1990), I have given

evidence that the Yue language spoken by the people of Wu also belonged to the Tai group of languages.

In the fourth verse, the character 縵 is equated with WTH mɔɔm 'dirty, ragged, untidy'. This word should not be understood in too literal a way: rather, it expresses the feeling of inferiority felt by the boatman in front of the prince: accordingly, the old Chinese version translated it as 'ignorant'.

The character 惿 in the fifth verse has two readings, 上紙切 and 田黎切 in the Ji Yun, with possible correspondences to WTH caɨ and ʔdɛɛ (both words: 'heart'). However, the latter might be a loan from Khmer: thus I chose WTH caɨ.

In the same verse, 河 represents WTH graih 'to wish, to desire, to yearn for, to love', with tone A cognates in Maonan gai[1] 'love' and Zhuang, Dioi kjai[2] 'love' (but Wuming klai[2] 'to desire, attached to'). Note that the meanings 'to desire, want' and 'to love' are also expressed by the same word (愛 ɔi[5]) in Cantonese and Hakka.

It should be noted that not a few words of the old Yue language in the Song have Chinese cognates, e.g.: 兮 ; 乎 ; 予; 抃 : 忭; 草 : 遣 ; 昌 : 匠 ; 州 : 舟 ; 昭 : 主 ; 踰 : 喻 ; 秦 : 親 ; 滲 : 陰 / 暗 ; 河 : 愛 etc.

I am now able to give a new translation of the Song into modern Chinese and English:

夜啊，歡樂會晤的夜晚！
Oh, the fine night, we meet in happiness tonight !

我多麼害羞啊，我又很能搖船。
I am so shy, ah ! I am good at rowing.

慢悠悠的搖船橫渡啊，滿懷喜歡！
Rowing slowly across the river, ah ! I am so pleased !

污穢的我啊，尊貴的王子殿下竟然相識了，
Dirty though I am, ah ! I made acquaintance with your highness the Prince.

藏在心底的，是我始終不渝的思戀。

Hidden forever in my heart, ah ! is my adoration and longing.

Compare my decipherment with the old Chinese version:

今夕何夕兮？搴舟中流，

Oh ! what night is tonight, we are rowing on the river.

今日何日兮？得與王子同舟！

Oh ! What day is today, I get to share a boat with a prince.

蒙羞被好兮？不訾詬恥。

The prince's kindness makes me shy, I take no notice of the people's mocking cries.

心幾頑而不絕兮，得知王子.

Ignorant, but not uncared for, I make acquaintance with a prince.

山有木兮木有枝

There are trees in the mountains and there are branches on the trees,

心悅君兮君不知

I adore you, oh ! you do not know.

It is clear that the verses 'what day is today' and 'there are trees in the mountains and there are branches on the trees' in the old Chinese version were void in the original text of the song (they are also void in Prof. Wei's decipherment). The old Chinese version was not a literal, word-to-word, line-to-line translation of the original song: we know it is too difficult to translate a poem or a song in such a way. Thus, while the original text includes 32 characters (i.e. 32 syllables), allowing for 8 verses of 4 syllables each, as in Shi Jing-type prosody, at most, the old Chinese version includes 54 characters, divided into 10 or 12 lines (of 4 characters mostly). It is clear, then, that the old Chinese version was not literal, and that it included added parts, to meet the requirements of Chu Ci-type prosody. Take the line 'there are trees on the mountains...': it bears no direct relation with the contextual meaning, and uses the word 枝 *klje only to provide a rhyme for 知 *te in the next line.

A line used to introduce a new rhyme in Shi Jing poetry is called 興 xing or 起興 qi xing. The book 'Gu Shi Bian' 古史辨 (Gu 1931, vol. III) includes three articles by Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, Zhong Jingwen 鐘敬文 and He Dingsheng 何定生, arguing (with supporting quotes from Zhu Xi and Zheng Qiao, two famous Song

dynasty philosophers) that 'xing' is an inserted phrase used to harmonize rhyming in songs, bearing no relationship to the idea of the poem. Since different languages have different sound systems, it is impossible that the insertion of a kind of additional element for the sake of rhyming in the old Chinese version be an adequate translation of the original. That is why the words 'trees', 'branches', 'mountains' and 'today' in the old Chinese version do not appear in my decipherment: these words were added by the author of the old Chinese version in order to meet the prosodic requirements of Chu Ci-style prosody.

The words of the old Yue language are represented in this paper by Siamese words drawn from Siamese-Chinese dictionaries (Tang 1946, Guangzhou Waiguoyu Xueyuan 1990). This should not be regarded as an unsurmountable difficulty: indeed, dictionaries such as these include large quantities of words having entered Siamese at different historical periods, as well as words occurring in ancient and archaic documents, dialectal words etc; moreover, the orthography of modern Siamese directly reflects the phonology of Ancient Thai. Thus I believe that WTH is generally representative of the Tai group of languages.

Although the words of the Yue people's song may be compared with Siamese, the verses would be easily understood by modern Thai speakers. That the language of the Song is different from any living Tai language, in syntax and vocabulary in particular, is to be expected, as the song was recorded over 2500 years ago.

Finally, I wish to thank Professors Xing Gongwan, Zhang Gongjin, Zhou Xuhong Ying Lin and Laurent Sagart for their help.

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